

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 822

CS 204 005

AUTHOR Lamb, Pose
TITLE Literature for Children-Why?
PUB DATE Jun 77
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on Language and Reading (Chicago, Illinois, June 20-22, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Reading; Childrens Books; *Childrens Literature; Elementary Education; *Literary Analysis; Literature; *Literature Appreciation; Readability; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

Although there is general agreement on the importance of children's literature in the elementary school curriculum and on the need for adequate teacher education in this field, there are many specific issues related to children's literature that need clarification. One such issue is the role of literature in the reading program. Some educators, questioning the literary merit of basal readers and their difficulty for many children, favor literature-based reading programs; however, many children's books of high literary quality present serious readability problems for children. Children therefore need adequate reading skills before they can venture independently in books. A second major issue is related to the desirability of literary analysis for children. When overdone, literary analysis can cause loss of interest in a selection, but a well-handled examination of aspects of the author's craft can enhance children's literary awareness and appreciation. A third issue is related to the frequent underestimation of children's ability to respond to literature. Even very young children can be helped to respond to literature at more than a rote level. (GW)

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Pose Lamb

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Pose Lamb
Department of Education
205 Education Building
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana 47907

LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN - WHY?

There is general agreement that children's literature deserves a more prominent place in the curriculum of the elementary school than it currently occupies. There is also general agreement that knowledge of children's literature is an important part of the preparation of the elementary language arts teacher. The Committee on Preparation in Language Arts for the Elementary Teacher (N.C.T.E. Conference on English Education Committee, 1976) places such knowledge second on its list of Essential Competencies, only one position behind knowledge of the English Language. Components of this knowledge, according to the committee members, are:

1. Acquaintance with books and authors,
2. Ability to guide children's responses to literature and
3. Ability to use judgment in book selection.

Norine Odland amplifies this basic list as follows:

"Study of children's literature is an essential component in preservice programs for teachers in elementary schools. Major emphasis in the college course will be on content of literature appropriate for children through age twelve. Students should learn to recognize literary elements which contribute to making prose or poetry worth reading. A wide variety of literature should be studied, both historical and contemporary. Ability to judge literary merit and potential reader appeal should be developed through reading children's literature. Related concerns may be included - such as censorship, history, curriculum organization, prizes and awards, film, but only as they relate to a strong base in scholarly study of the content of children's literature." (N.C.T.E. Conference on English Education, 1976, p. 365).

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Dr. Odland's priorities will be referred to, at least indirectly, later, but the term essential component, referring to the role of a children's literature course in teacher preparation, is of special significance at this point, and few would disagree with this emphasis. (Parenthetically, it should be noted that, if necessary, the three major areas mentioned first, can be explored at the graduate level, or reexamined, if the undergraduate course was taken some years ago or was inadequate in one or more of the areas.)

Beyond agreement on the importance of children's literature and the necessity for adequate (or better, hopefully,) teacher education in this field, there is very little concensus. The issues, and the quotation from Dr. Odland referred to just a few of them, need and deserve clarification and discussion. After such clarification and discussion, and exploration of the reasons for the divergence of opinions, decision making, at all levels, from elementary classroom to graduate course work, may be a little less difficult.

One of the most significant issues, relates to the purposes or objectives of children's literature in the elementary school. To begin with, what is (or should be), its role in the reading program? This is now a new question! In 1891, President Charles Eliot of Harvard University wrote:

"It would be for the advancement of the whole public school system if every reader were hereafter to be absolutely excluded from the school. I object to them because they are not real literature; they are but mere scraps of literature, even when the single lessons or materials of which they are composed are taken from literature. But there are a great many readers that seem to have been composed especially for the use of children.

They are not made up of selections from recognizable literature, and as a rule this class is simply ineffable trash. They are entirely unfit material to use in the training of our children. The object of reading with children is to convey to them the ideals of the human race; our readers do not do that are thoroughly unfitted to do it. I believe that we should substitute in all our schools real literature for readers." (Smith, 1965, p. 120).

Even the most current lists of criticisms of basal readers include some reference to their lack of literary merit, although some very excellent, and very expensive, materials are included in many, if not most basal series. Sebesta and Iverson strongly urge that instructional programs in literature and reading exist separately:

"We propose that basic reading instruction and the teaching of literature be treated as separate enterprises; that the skills on which literary reading depends continue to be developed, but that it be recognized that literary reading serves distinctive purposes beyond those basic skills." (Sebesta and Iverson, p.4)

The following quotation from Charlotte Huck's new edition indicates that she may not completely agree with Sebesta and Iverson. She writes:

"One of the best kept secrets in education is that children learn to read by reading. Most teachers overteach the skills of reading to the detriment of reading practice and enjoyment. Many primary teachers spend over half of their day teaching children to learn how to read without ever giving them the opportunity for reading."

She continues:

"With the number and variety of trade books, both hardback and paperback, available today, there is no reason why all children must read from the same textbooks. If teachers really understand the process of teaching reading, then a book or the back of a cereal box can be used. Children do not have to use basal texts for beginning reading. There are many trade books available today with enjoyable stories that have been written with simplified vocabularies which are easy to read. These are interesting stories written by imaginative authors; they offer far more challenge than most preprimers." (Huck, 1976, pp. 601-602).

Can necessary reading skills be taught outside the structure and carefully developed hierarchy included in most basal programs? More specifically, is the average elementary classroom teacher capable of developing such strategies? These are major questions, outside the scope of this article, but they must be answered prior to determining to what extent a literature based reading program will be effective.

From another perspective, is it appropriate, and/or desirable, to impose the restrictions of a simplified vocabulary and limited syntactic structures on highly creative authors who certainly have other goals in mind when they write? Or should there be less stress, in basal programs, on skill development and more stress on the literary merit and motivating quality of the selections at each level?

Classroom teachers are currently claiming that basal readers are too difficult for all but their most capable readers. It is not difficult to understand the reason for this complaint. Basal authors and publishers have reacted quite strongly to accusations regarding too much vocabulary and syntactic control, as well as the criticism of the literary quality of their selections, especially those chosen for beginning levels. The senior author of a widely used basal series once stated, with complete conviction, that fourth graders could not read a sentence of more than twenty-three words. Included in the series bearing his name were stories and plays originally written by well known authors, but rewritten and adapted to the extent that the authors might have identified the characters, setting, and basic plot as theirs, but little else. Such a compromise is no longer acceptable, and we now have

basal reader selections which have scarcely been edited for readability level and which utilize vocabularies and syntactic structures which are, to understate the situation, challenging to all but the most competent readers. A group of second grade pupils (Mean IQ, Lorge Thorndike, 120) recently completed a set of cloze passages as part of a research project conducted by the writer. These passages were taken directly from the paperback written for the grade level, and reading level, tested, and the booklet was part of a major publisher's basal series. Even these bright pupils has some difficulty with the incomplete sentences, ellipses, idiomatic speech, and pronoun referrents which were two or three sentences behind. The stories were very well written, however; it's a shame more of the pupils could not comprehend them!

It's probable, furthermore, that a number of eleven year olds would have a little trouble reading the opening passage from The Grey King, the 1976 Newbery Award winning book: "Are you awake, Will? Will? Will? Wake up, it's time for your medicine, love . . . "

"The face swung like a pendulum, to and fro, rose high up in a pink blur; dropped again; divided into six pink blurs, all of them spinning madly like wheels. He closed his eyes. He could feel sweat cold on his forehead, panic cold in his mind. I've lost it! I've forgotten! Even in darkness, the world spun round. There was a great buzzing in his head like rushing water, until for a moment, the voice broke through again." (Cooper, 1976, p. 3)

Think of the problems this passage would present to an adolescent or pre-adolescent who selected The Grey King as his reading material in an individualized reading program, especially if his decoding skills were adequate but his comprehension skills were not! The writer enjoyed reading The Grey King very much, and considers it quite deserving of the

medal, and fantasy isn't her favorite genre. Susan Cooper is an excellent writer. It would be a disservice to the author and reader alike to turn this sensitively written book into a vehicle for teaching some differences between Welsh/British, English and American English, or a vehicle for teaching any other specific reading skill.

Thirty-four Newbery Medal award books were examined for purposes of determining readability; Daniel Boone (1940) was the first, Julie of the Wolves (1973) was the most recent to be measured for readability. Averaging scores from the Botel and Fry scales, it appears that only three books are written at fourth grade level (Sounder, 1970, Miracles on Maple Hill, 1957, and The Wheel On the School, 1955). Ten were at seventh grade level, including one of the writer's favorites, Shadow of a Bull (1965) and two were scored at eighth grade level. (Schafer, 1976, p. 558).

Clearly, self-selection, a basic premise of individualized reading, precludes limiting a child's choices on the basis of data such of these. High interest, familiarity with an author's style, etc., etc., etc., may well be contravening factors. It is suggested that using selections of high literary merit as vehicles for teaching reading skills presents some potentially serious problems which may override the benefits which may result from using reading materials which are judged to be well written. Such problems are even more serious for young children. Rewriting a Caldecott so that its vocabulary, sentence structure, etc., place it at the second grade readability level is unthinkable--as unthinkable as we now consider reworking a child's language before writing it as an experience chart or story. Perhaps the easy-to-read or I-can-read-it-myself books

are more interesting than current preprimer selections. This question remains unanswered, as far as the writer knows.

Are the literature program and the reading program completely contradictory, or do they complement each other in some way or ways? Clearly, each has a great deal to offer the other which is supportive and enhancing. The language patterns, vocabulary, and unusual syntactic structures (Rumer Godden's Holly and Ivy is excellent for the latter) which children encounter, naturally and easily, as they read good books can certainly better equip them for all types of informational reading, reading in the content fields and for further experiences in literature. Children need adequate reading skills for independent venturing in books. In fact, once a child is reading at eighth grade level, you will recall, there are no Newbery's he can't handle, in all probability; many fourth graders can read that well and the concern should be with the concept load of a book such a child selected, not its readability level.

In short, it seems rather simplistic to say that children learn to read merely by reading and that only the best is good enough.

There are similar difficulties with any view of literature as a vehicle. It is that, of course, and almost every teacher has used favorite poems for choral reading or choral speaking, has used book chapters to stimulate diary writing, story or letter writing, or to set up minimal situations for creative drama. Literature is a vehicle, this, and much, much more. It has value in and of itself.

This brings us to the second major issue to be discussed; literary analysis for children. The writer recalls doing a character comparison between Madeline and Chibi--Madeline who stays the same, flat, throughout

rot one book but several, and Chibi who changes, develops and illustrates 'roundness' in contrast to flatness. There was a devastating response from a student (fortunately, this mistake wasn't made with a group of children). She said "Well, you've succeeded in thoroughly ruining those books for me. I know know more about characterization than I want to know." This illustrates a major danger in working with children in literary analysis. Moffett may be right in suggesting this activity be delayed until high school or college (Moffett, 1968, p. 4). No teacher wants to dwell on plot, setting, or characterization to the point that a child loses interest in the selection as well as the process. Yet, properly handled, and not overdone, an examination of some aspects of the author's craft enhances rather than diminishes a child's literary awareness and, hopefully, his literary appreciation. Bee Cullinan puts it very well: "The critic of children's literature shares his insights and analysis of deeper meanings so that children under his guidance will begin to recognize the qualities of good literature themselves. Matthew Arnold suggested that the function of a critic is to "learn to know and propagate the best." This aptly describes the role of the adult who assumes responsibility for shaping the reading habits of a child.

Opponents of the need for reading guidance demand that children be allowed to read for pleasure and not be required to analyze material they choose to read. While allowing that there is a place for reading--which is not subjected to analysis, this writer proposes that neither extreme represents the optimum reading pattern for children. Balancing the amount

of direction, guidance in analysis, and instruction in critical reading with completely free choice is a preferable route. Assuming that imaginative literature is read primarily for pleasure, which should be the over purpose of all instruction in reading of literature, the position stated here implies that appropriately applied skills of analysis can increase understanding of literature and thereby heighten the pleasure obtained." (Cullinan, 1971, p. 4). Cullinan very carefully avoids recommending that children learn to feel comfortable with the labels common to literary analysis, and so do Sebesta and Iverson. They note that knowledge of literary elements, and how these synthesize in good literature, . . . "will help us guide children in selecting literature. Second, appreciation of these elements will help children enjoy literature" (p. 58). This hardly sounds like a recommendation for direct teaching of literary analysis! Charlotte Huck takes a much stronger position.

"Children in the elementary school can't help but develop some literary awareness. However, knowledge about literature should be secondary to children's wide experiencing of literature. Too frequently we have substituted the study of literary criticism for the experience of literature itself. Attention to content should precede consideration of form . . . Teachers need to know something of the structure of literature in order to provide children with a frame of reference to direct their insights. Children, however, should be lead to discover these literary elements gradually, and only as these elements shed light on the children's understanding of the meaning of a story or poem. Knowledge of the structure of a discipline frees a teacher to be unstructured in her teaching." (Huck, 1976, p. 709).

Can a child identify the differences between prose and poetry, realism and fantasy (hazy and blurred as these boundaries are) without using those terms? Perhaps he can describe the differences between Chibi and Madeline without using the terms round and flat but one wonders

what terms might be substituted? Huck, and others, believe such knowledge, and the appropriate labels for facets of the knowledge, will come gradually and easily. Concepts or generalizations, the ability to categorize accurately and flexibly, are qualities which are more important than labels, it is true, but there seems little reason for avoiding a discussion of plot and identifying it as plot. Further, if it's important that theme be distinguished from plot, why not use the generally accepted labels? This can be overdone, of course, and memorizing labels can replace reading well-written materials and having a meaningful discussion about what was read. However, this shouldn't happen, and need not.

Two basic positions have been taken on what seem to be significant issues relative to teaching literature in the elementary school. First: literature in the elementary school must be regarded as more than a vehicle for teaching reading or any other facet of the language arts, although of course, it is that. However, neither the child's acquisition of essential skills and competencies in composition, vocabulary development, creative drama or detecting propaganda devices nor his development of literary awareness and appreciation will benefit if one area is treated as subservient to the other. Perhaps Sebesta and Iverson overstate the case for separation. Nevertheless, language arts, reading and literature obviously coexist yet have separate and significant entities, each of which deserve respect and special attention. 'Interrelatedness' is a term which has, perhaps, been overused. Second: 'literary analysis' is not a dirty term. It has been and can be overdone. It is obviously an essential part of the preparation of elementary teachers as Norine

Odland says. If it contributes to the dissecting of an excellent selection, then a teacher or librarian has done too much. For the most part, however, additional knowledge does not lead to disinterest, to boredom, or anything except the desire to know more. A teacher must be sensitive, know the pupils involved and their literary backgrounds. If a teacher knows literature and children, mistakes can be avoided and pupils' literary awareness and literary appreciation will be enhanced.

One more issue will be treated, briefly. At a time when cognitive processes and reading are being studied with an intensity reserved for language processes and reading a few years ago, we seem to have totally accepted a Piagetian point of view which concedes that nothing significant related to abstract thinking can occur prior to the child's entry into the magic stage of formal operations. (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969, p. 130). It's time to look again at the findings of the Ohio State critical reading study which suggest very clearly that children can be helped to respond to literature at more than a rote level. Teachers can be helped to ask significant questions about literary selections and children not yet old enough to be at the formal operations stage can respond to these questions in meaningful ways. Wolf and others write:

"This study indicates that children even in the primary grades can also be taught to read critically. It is particularly important to note that instruction in critical reading did not interfere with growth in general reading . . . Except at the first grade level, however, the added instruction in critical reading did not assist the subject in doing any better in the general reading test. This gives support to the idea that general reading and critical reading abilities are not synonymous." (Wolf, et. al., 1967, p. 14).

It is disturbing to encounter teachers who dislike challenge, and the general disorder and untidiness of questions with more than one right answer, who justify questioning techniques concentrated entirely at the convergent, even the knowledge level, on the basis of Piagetian research findings which suggest that anything attempted at a more sophisticated level will be non-productive. Perhaps we are less likely to have dramatically successful results with six year olds than with twelves when we ask 'Why' questions rather than 'What' or 'Who' questions about a literary selection. Especially, since Piagetian research clearly indicates that each stage builds on the preceding stage, we may well be neglecting and perhaps even damaging the development of some significant cognitive skills if we wait too long. At least let's stop using this as an excuse for not doing what it is difficult and challenging to do! Teachers might try to elicit divergent, creative responses to literature because these discussions make work with children and childrens' literature more interesting and rewarding! Children's abilities to respond to literature or to anything else should not be underestimated.

The question posed in the title: Literature for Children - Why? has, perhaps, still not been answered. Literature for children exists to give pleasure to children, to acquaint them with and help them understand the human condition, and to help them become increasingly selective in their reading. Essentially, the issue becomes one of establishing criteria. What is a good book? Paul Hazard has written a classic, Books, Children and Men; he provides the following criteria:

"I like books that remain faithful to the very essence of art; namely, those that offer to children an intuitive and direct way of knowledge, a simple beauty capable of being perceived immediately, arousing in their souls a vibration which will endure all their lives.

And those that provide them with pictures, the kind that they like; pictures chosen from the riches of the whole world; enchanting pictures that bring release and joy, happiness gained before reality closes in upon them, insurance against the time, all too soon, when there will be nothing but realities.

And books that awaken in them not maudlin sentimentality, but sensibility that enable them to share in great human emotions; that give them respect for universal life - that of animals of plants; that teach them not to despise everything that is mysterious in creation and in man.

And books which respect the valor and eminent dignity of play; which understand that the training of intelligence and reason cannot, and must not, always have the immediately useful and practical as its goal.

I like books of knowledge; not those that want to encroach upon recreation, upon leisure, pretending to be able to teach anything without drudgery. There is not truth in that. There are things which cannot be learned without great pains; we must be resigned to it. I like books of knowledge when they are not just grammar or geometry poorly disguised. When they have tact and moderation; when, instead of pouring out so much material on a child's soul that is crushed, they plant in it a seed that will develop from the inside. I like them when they do not claim that knowledge can take the place of everything else. I like them especially when they distil from all the different kinds of knowledge the most difficult and the most necessary-- that of the human heart." (Hazard, 1969, pp. 42-43).

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